

A chat with Board Chair Michael Parker

Growing up in the Bronx, New York, GoTriangle's Board Chair Michael Parker had a close and comfortable relationship with transit from an early age that only grew stronger as he came to realize its potential to help people and the planet.

"I basically grew up on the New York City bus and subway system," he says. "I took the subway to high school. So I've been devoted to transit for many, many years – one of my minor passions."

Passionate also about preventing global warming and improving life for disadvantaged communities, Parker sees transit as a way to help those causes. He says he enjoys his work on GoTriangle's board because it's an opportunity to advocate for regional transit.

"I think that the Triangle area, quite candidly, is way behind where it needs to be in terms of transit, at both the local and regional levels," he says. "So I'm excited about being on the board at GoTriangle and having the opportunity to help us become a true, multi-modal transit provider for the region and help reduce pollution and combat global warming. It helps people in terms of their day-to-day lives, get to and from work, to educational opportunities, health care, and it is really important in addressing climate change. ... If the earth burns up, nothing else much matters."

Parker first came to North Carolina as a graduate student in neurobiology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He returned to New York, where he earned an MBA in health care administration from Baruch College, and then spent most of his professional career in New York as a health care and life sciences consultant. His clients ranged from nonprofit hospitals, especially those serving disadvantaged communities, to academic medical centers, pharmaceutical and biotechnical companies. In 2010, he and his wife, Linda Prager, moved to Chapel Hill, where his interest in transportation led him to become a Chapel Hill Transportation Board member. He now serves on the Chapel Hill Town Council and on the Chapel Hill Transit Partners, which oversees Chapel Hill Transit.



Q: What would you like employees to know about you?

During these difficult times with COVID-19, I want the folks who work at GoTriangle to know how grateful I am and how grateful the board is for all the hard work they have been doing in moving people and in caring for people. It is so vitally important that we have the dedicated men and women who work at GoTriangle. So I am just incredibly grateful and thankful for everything they are doing for GoTriangle but, more importantly, for their communities. The board and senior management appreciate the sacrifices they are making, under normal circumstances, and even more now.

I am super strongly committed to the goals of GoTriangle, growing ourselves, so that we continue to deliver and expand high-quality bus service and become the agency that helps the Triangle develop its transit system through a variety of new kinds of modes, whether it's bus rapid transit or commuter rail or other things.

Q: What do you think are the most important issues facing GoTriangle, and how do you see solving them?

No. 1 right now is getting through this COVID-19 crisis and coming out the other end, but I am optimistic that we will get through this and our best days are ahead of us. For me, one of the big challenges is that we don't have in this area – or anywhere in North Carolina – dedicated revenue streams for regional transit. It's really important that somehow, working with the counties, and ultimately perhaps with the state legislature, we get more funding for regional transit and more dedicated revenue streams for regional transit so that we can do the kinds of things that we need to do to create the transit system over the next 20, 30, 40 years that the Triangle needs. And No. 2 is making sure that we can bring together the counties and many other stakeholders – businesses, universities, health care institutions – to have a common shared vision for regional transit and then help work with those folks to get the support we need to deliver it.

Q: You said you think the best days are ahead of us. That is very good to hear especially now when so many people are worried. But why do you say that?

Because I think that, No. 1, we will get through this COVID-19 crisis. I don't know how long it is going to take, but I am optimistic that we will get through it. I think that as an organization, we have a new CEO whom I am really thrilled we've been able to recruit and bring on board. I think the board shares a common vision for regional transit and is committed to continuing to improve GoTriangle so that it does a better job of having the confidence of our region. I know that the needs are really enormous, and we've got to deliver on them. And I am confident that we will develop the abilities to do that. So we have become a very effective regional bus provider, and going forward, I am confident that we will be an equally effective provider of other modalities of transit for our region.

Q: Is there anything that you would like to know about employees? I am trying to facilitate communication from the bottom up and back.

I think [facilitating communication] is important. It's the bus operators who are seeing passengers every day, and I think it would be great, for example, if our operators could tell us what they think would improve service and what they think passengers would appreciate more or less of. Getting that kind of two-way communication – letting the folks at the front line help inform our decision-making and our planning – [is important].

Q: And how do you think that could be done?

I'm not really sure. Probably either surveys or just making more of an effort to maybe reach out, have focus groups with some of these folks and have them have an opportunity to meet with either senior managers or board members and demystify us.

Q: I also see that you've worked in public service a number of places. Can you talk about why that is important?

I've been pretty lucky in my life, and I think it is important for those of us who can to give back to the community in whatever way we can. For many years, I've been involved [in giving back], both in terms of my professional career, a lot of it was consulting for not-for-profit hospitals, many of them serving disadvantaged and underrepresented communities. And then I've tried to be involved with not-for-profits that serve the community, both when I was living in New York and since I've been in Chapel Hill. I've served on the board of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce. I currently serve on the board of the Carrboro Arts Center. I recently joined the board of OE Enterprises, which is a really great agency based in Hillsborough that helps disabled folks, trains them and helps them find employment. So I just think it's important for folks when they can, and in whatever way they can, to give back to their communities.

Q: Has there been anybody who has inspired you?

Different people have inspired me in different ways. So one of the people who has inspired me a great deal is actually Dean Smith, the former UNC basketball coach, and the way he lived his life and the things that he tried to do and the wisdom that he shared. One thing that I try to keep in mind is something that he said, "Don't be proud of doing the right thing; just do the right thing."